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COVER STORY

Western look belies Soviet leader's aims

He's robust,
stylish and
urbane but
'Inside beats
heart of pure
communist'

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and Juan J. Walte
USA TODAY

Mikhail S. Gorbachev dresses like a banker, appears comfortable in a Rolls-Royce and jokes about Marxism.

His wife, Raisa, is at ease with Westerners, studies philosophy and wears her hair fashionably short. The pair so charmed Britain last Decem-

ber that the press dubbed them "the new Gucci comrades."

But images aside, Gorbachev — at 54 the youngest to take power since Josef Stalin, 45, in 1924 — has the opportunity to control the Soviet Union through the year 2000. And the passing of the communist torch to a new generation of Soviet bureaucrats holds unknown challenges for the West.

The first Soviet leader to be born after the Russian Revolution, Gorbachev already has shown a mastery of the media — he was a virtual unknown until his carefully planned trip to Britain in December solidified his position as Konstantin Chernenko's heir apparent.

By Monday, a spate of press reports described Gorbachev as the "Soviet Gary Hart" — or he and his wife as the "communist Jack and Jackie Kennedy."

"There is a whiff of the Kennedy aura in Gorbachev ... in that there is in the Soviet Union a yearning for change," said C.G. Jacobsen of the School for International Studies in Miami.

But warned Brookings Institution analyst Jerry Hough: "Just as Reagan and Kennedy put anti-Sovietism at the core of their programs, Gorbachev will put anti-Americanism at the core of his program."

And former CIA deputy director Ray S. Cline said: "He speaks softly about peace and carries a lead pipe, which he's perfectly willing to use in a back alley. All that stuff about him being Kennedy-esque is a propaganda job."

Westerners who've met Gorbachev describe an urbane, intelligent and cosmopolitan leader — schooled in the law and agriculture and apparently unscarred by the grim Soviet memory of World War II and Stalin's brutal purges.

Physically, Gorbachev (pronounced Gor-ba-CHOFF) appears robust — a far cry from the doddering leaders so far in the 1980s: Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and Chernenko.

Balding at about 5-foot-9, Gorbachev wears glasses, smiles readily, and has a red birthmark on his forehead — often hidden by a trilby hat or air-brushed out of official photographs.

Peasant-born in 1931, he never fought in World War II — the harshest memory of the Soviet experience. Instead, he's been viewed as one of the Soviet Union's "new technocrats," hoping to accelerate his nation's slow-moving bureaucracy.

Yet few analysts expect dramatic changes in policy: He still must consolidate his power, they say, and has shown evidence of a dislike for the West.

"I don't think we shall see Gorbachev rolling up the socialist system and saying from now on it's going to be private enterprise all the day," said Soviet expert Geoffrey Stern in London. "He's not Western in that sense."

Buttressing that view, Gorbachev said in his acceptance speech Monday that Soviet policies "remain unchanged."

Said Rand Corp. Soviet expert Harry Gelman: "Many made the mistake of judging Andropov on the basis that he drank scotch and read Western novels ... when in reality all of these projections of Andropov as a closet liberal were pretty silly."

But experts agree the look of the Soviet leadership will be different — at least for the short term.

"He'll be one of the few Soviet leaders who knows how to appear on television, who knows how to make a speech, who is impressive," said Stern.

While in London last year, Gorbachev charmed the British even as he tried to convince Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to oppose Reagan's "star wars" defensive system.

His wife, about 51, bragged about her granddaughter — they have three children — and wore pin-striped suits and outfits never seen on past Soviet wives. (At home, she's largely ignored. Her birthdate and birthplace aren't known.) It's believed she has a philosophy degree from Moscow State University.

In London, though, "the wife helped," said Soviet expert Marina Marcoux. "She blends in nicely with the Western image of an emerging leadership couple."

The trip also was programmed, Hough believes, to "groom" Gorbachev for the leadership spot. "They were testing him to make certain he did not make gaffes or appear rude," he said. "He passed that test with flying colors."

Like his mentor, Andropov, Gorbachev has called for "deep transformations" in the Soviet economy — but his views on reform are largely unknown.

He took over control of agriculture in 1978 — but was not hurt politically by a series of disastrous grain harvests.

And while he has visited Western Europe and Canada (not the USA yet), he is not viewed as an expert on foreign policy.

Strategic expert Edward Luttwak believes it could take Gorbachev years to consolidate his power. "He has the biological capacity to do so, but he is also the first leader in many years who is young enough to be worth conspiring against."

Indeed, Gorbachev enters office with a stable full of youthful competition. The man considered his chief rival, Grigory Romanov, is only 61. Others, including party bosses Vitaly Vorotnikov, 58, and Geidar Aliyev, 61, are part of the Politburo's younger guard.

And he still must temper any dramatic new moves against the remaining septuagenarians in power.

Will there be a change in style because of his age?

"He is just an under-60 baby surrounded by old men," Luttwak said. "Remember that (Nikita) Khrushchev was reforming the Soviet Union while he was wearing those baggy suits ... but when he was wearing Italian suits, de-Stalinization had come to an end."

"The old gray predictable style of Kremlin leadership may have died with Konstantin Chernenko," said BBC Moscow correspondent Tim Sebastian. "He may smile more than other Soviet leaders, and his wife may be good-looking, but inside beats the heart of a pure communist."

Contributing: Dan Ehrlich in London and John Hanchette.